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By- Lynch, Ann Q.; Hall, Everette E.

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STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

GAINESVILLE

EFFECTS OF THE PERCEPTION OF PEER LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE UPON FRESHMAN WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Ann Q. Lynch, Ed.D. and Everette E. Hall, Ph.D.

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PREVENTIVE ACTION IN COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT MH 2144

EFFECTS OF THE PERCEPTION OF PEER LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE UPON FRESHMAN WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Orientation programs take many forms at different universities and within the context of each university there are programs for orientation to various campus functions. Residence hall living is a prime area of new experiences for entering freshmen. Therefore introduction to a new way of living makes a residence hall orientation program of vital concern to those who view education as both a living and learning experience. Riker (1966) suggested that orientation programs designed to introduce students to the regimen of higher education need to be emphasized in housing units on the residential campus because these units are the student's first point of contact with the institution. Another aspect of the importance of orientation programs is some evidence that indicates that a major change in the values of college students occurs during the initial six to eight weeks of their first year (Rossi, 1964). Thus, these first weeks can be viewed as setting the whole tone of the student's college life.

The late adolescent still in the exploration stage (Erickson, 1950) is essentially concerned with identity formation as his central developmental task. Blocher (1966) has categorized the coping behaviors of this period as "reciprocal behaviors" which are substantially the interpersonal behaviors necessary to function within close, equalitarian

relationships. Most of a late adolescent's past interpersonal experiences have been within authoritarian relationships and conforming peer groups with little emphasis upon individual responsibility. In developing toward positive interpersonal relationships the freshman needs assistance in achieving his identity through a sense of belonging and caring about other individuals, groups, and ideals. Becoming oriented to college life is usually a difficult developmental task in the experience of every new student. The freshman faces not only a transition in setting and living arrangements but must come to grips at this point with the difficulty in accepting a relative change in his self-image regarding both his social and intellectual abilities. Hall and Barger (1966) after interviewing a sample of freshmen at the University of Florida wrote:

> Many students come from small high schools in which they are considered outstanding in some way. When they reach the University they find that this status of relative superiority is no longer realistic, and adjustments need to be made which are sometimes painful. (p.5)

In an effort to personalize the university community, structured friendships are provided for freshman women in an orientation program to residence hall living at the University of Florida. The new students are assigned to freshman advisors who volunteer to act as "Big Sisters" and welcome their "Little Sisters" to the University and to their respective residence halls. Usually the freshman advisor

is given about five freshmen who live in the same area, if not on the same floor of the hall. The position of the advisor is one of peer leadership and is filled by students who have had some experience with college life and cooperative residence hall living, but who are not paid staff members. These relationships can be a real source of help to the new students as well as to the staff. Since one aspect of the neophyte's conflict is his struggle for independence, the freshman is often reluctant to seek help from a professional or student staff person because they represent authority. However, the freshman advisor with professional guidance can be made aware of situations that should be referred to a counselor and is frequently in the best position to help the freshman through a difficult period.

The freshman advisor is responsible for writing a letter of welcome in the summer, greeting the new student on her arrival, introducing her to the campus and to the residence hall staff, and informing her of various institutional policies. In addition, advisors are encouraged to help their advisees adjust to college academically, socially, and personally, as well as to show leadership attitudes which will foster confidence and respect. The advisors volunteer in the Spring and plans are made for the fall orientation program. Workshops are conducted to acquaint the helpers with their responsibilities and opportunities. Since all volunteers are utilized, the non-selection policy accounts for a wide range of motivation and level of participation

on the part of the freshman advisors. To evaluate the effects of the program and to make improvements in it, a study was conducted during the academic year 1966-67.

PROCEDURE

Sample:

The sample was composed of freshman women in three residence halls at the University of Florida representing three types of halls and populations as follows:

	Small Female Hall	Coeducational Hall	One-Half Of Large Female Hall	Totals:
Total Women Residents	153	207	316	676
Number of Freshman Advisors	22	22	22	66
Number of Freshmen	67	104	143	314
Ratio of Freshmen to Advisors	3.05	4.73	6.50	4.75
Range of Freshmen to Advisors	2 to 5	2 to 9	3 to 10	2 to 10

Questionnaires:

In October, 1966, freshmen residents in the above halls were asked to rate their respective freshman advisors using a seven point

scale regarding five dimensions: (1) standard activities; (2) help with social adjustment; (3) help with academic adjustment; (4) help with personal adjustment, and (5) leadership attitudes.

At the beginning of the next trimester, (February, 1967), the same freshman women were given a second questionnaire asking for ratings of various experiences which occurred during their first term in college, e.g., satisfaction with college life, reception in the residence hall, satisfaction with time their freshman advisor spent with them, their current relationship with their advisor, how much help they felt they received from different persons in their college environment, how much they used various campus facilities, and how many times they went home before the Christmas vacation.

ANALYSIS

Grade Point Index:

Actual grade point averages of the freshmen for the first trimester were compared with their predicted grade point averages. A linear regression equation was used to determine the predicted GPA using the individual's School and College Ability Total Score (SCAT), which each freshman takes upon entrance to the University. A scaled difference score was found by taking the difference between the actual and the predicted grade point average. Since the computer does not handle negative numbers and the greatest difference was no

more than 2.00, a scale from 0.00 to 4.00 accommodated the range of differences. The purpose in using the regression equation to obtain a predicted grade point average was not to predict an individual's grade point average but rather to control ability scores for the total sample.

Correlation Coefficients:

Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficients were computed between the ratings on the five categories of the first questionnaire and the different indices of the follow-up questionnaire and the scaled difference score. Only the data from those freshmen who completed the first trimester and both questionnaires is included in the following report.

RESULTS

In reporting only those relationships which showed the highest correlation, the following seem to be the most meaningful results. However, other relationships also reached significance at the .01 level and can be found in the table.

1. The higher the freshman rated the helping relationship in October (mean ratings of the five dimensions), the higher she rated the following variables in February: satisfaction with reception in the residence hall, orientation week, freshman advisor program in

general, time her freshman advisor spent with her the first trimester, and the current relationship with her advisor (see Table 1).

2. The higher the freshman rated the helping relationship, the more activities she entered during the first trimester and the fewer times she went home before Christmas vacation (see Table 1).
3. The higher the freshman rated her advisor in terms of personal and social help in adjusting to college, the more times the freshman contacted a professional staff member (see Table 2).
4. The higher she rated the freshman advisor on the personal dimension, the more times the freshman sought help from the student staff members (see Table 2).
5. The higher the freshman rated her advisor on academic help in adjusting to college, the more help she felt other people gave her, e.g., upperclass girls, other freshman advisors, hall council representatives, student and professional staff members, and her own professors (see Table 2).
6. The higher the freshman rated her advisor in October on leadership attitudes and academic help in adjusting to college, the higher she achieved in grades in relation to her ability her first college term (see Table 3).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE DATA

The rating scale is among the most widely used measurement methods in research today and it is also among the most subjective. The

variables of interpersonal relations are often too complicated to be assessed by objective tests and behavior records. Sometimes only a recording instrument as sensitive, complex, and alert as a human being can describe the behavior and characteristics of another individual (Remmers, 1963). In proposing a theory of sensitivity rating, Smith (1966) delineated the determinants of the perceiver's prediction about another person as follows: (1) the judging habits of the perceiver - his level of rating and the amount of his spread; (2) the interaction - his empathy and his observations; (3) the perceiver's knowledge of the person - his stereotypes and his knowledge of the individual.

The ratings in this study allow for even more subjectivity than the usual ratings of the behavior of others by asking the freshman to rate her perception of the help her advisor gave her in adjusting to college socially, academically, and personally, as well as the performance of expected activities and the advisor's leadership attitudes. Although these dimensions were operationally defined, what one freshman was responding to on any one of these categories was unique to her and could as well have been a function of her feelings about her own adequacy as it was of the advisor's adequacy in her helping role. There is little doubt that a halo effect is operating in which the ratings suffer from selective perceptions determined by a generalized liking or disliking of the advisor by the freshman. However, peer ratings have been shown to be more reliable ($r=.75$ to $.76$) than are superior ratings ($r=.42$ to $.58$) and also appear to have greater predictive validity (Wherry and Fryer, 1959).

The freshman advisor program had been intuitively perceived by the staff and the students as helpful to freshmen in adjusting to life at the University of Florida. The data above show that a relationship exists between how advisors are regarded as offering a positive helping relationship and how a freshman perceives herself becoming adjusted to the University. If the freshman advisor was rated high on expected activities, i.e., wrote a personal welcoming letter in the summer to the freshman, greeted her upon her arrival at the hall, helped her get settled, gave a party for her group of freshmen, was available for giving information about the campus and institutional policies, and was generally friendly and helpful, the freshman viewed her reception in the residence hall positively.

Satisfaction with the freshman advisor program in general, and with the time her own advisor devoted to her in particular, were related to the rating of the social dimension of the relationship. The freshman advisor may be a deciding influence in helping the new student adjust to college socially. Activities such as eating together, playing cards, going shopping or to a movie, meeting new people and talking about clothes, and dating, seem to have an impact in assisting the new student to find and make a place for herself in the college setting. Participating in shared social activities seemed to help the freshman make the transition from home to college more easily. Those freshmen who rated their advisors higher on social help also entered more hall

and campus activities and went home fewer times before the Christmas vacation. They seemed to become involved and to feel a sense of belonging. Of course this is placing a positive value judgment on participation in activities and a negative value judgment on the number of times a freshman went home which may not hold for a given individual.

Although the University is an academic environment, it must be remembered that students are social beings with many needs. Conversely, those new students who experienced the social dimension of the relationship negatively evidently felt some isolation. The expectation of a positive relationship which is followed by being neglected can be seen as more harmful than no relationship at all. This is exemplified in the following comment by a freshman, "My Big Sister wrote me the greatest letter last summer. I felt she had a special interest in me until I came here. Then she only spent a few minutes with me the first day performing her duties, and I haven't seen her since." Often women come to college with great social expectations and a fairly naive social knowledge, though they frequently cover it with a pseudo-sophistication. The freshman advisor, if properly educated and motivated, can help the new student get an accurate picture of the social life as well as how it fits into the total college experience.

The personal aspect of the relationship seemed most predictive of the total relationship in the second trimester. If the new student felt that her advisor made a point of getting to know her on an individual

basis, made her feel she could talk about some of her concerns and problems, was interested enough to ask about her background, and in general showed a personal involvement and concern, then the relationship could be described more as a continuing one. The freshman advisors are not considered junior counselors, but are encouraged to listen to their advisees and be aware of the problems of homesickness, roommate conflicts, and academic, social, and personal concerns. Often it is the freshman advisor who alerts the professional staff to the problems of the beginning student. Since communication is most spontaneous at the level of peer relationships, the advisor is frequently the primary person to whom the new freshman will turn with her personal problems. Having had the experience most recently of being a freshman at the University of Florida, the sophomore is the very person who can best understand all kinds of questions that plague the freshman. Having a friendship from the very beginning makes the new experience of going to college less threatening. As time goes on, this structured friendship is usually replaced by other relationships that make college life an enriching experience. One freshman put it, "My Big Sister made me feel like an individual and not a number. It felt better to know someone was interested in me before I got here."

Depending upon the content and magnitude of the problem the advisor may refer the freshman to the professional or subprofessional staff. Theoretically a linkage is established from the professional

staff through the advisors to every freshman woman. Therefore, the importance of the role of the advisor cannot be overemphasized. When a new student is troubled and the only person who has contact with her is her advisor, those qualities of understanding and leadership become vital to the resolution of the conflict. Understanding is important because empathy creates a facilitation for exploring the problem (Rogers, 1961) and leadership is salient because it directs the solution of the problem into proper channels.

The data in Table 2 indicate that the freshman advisor's assistance both in personal and social adjustment is related to the number of times contact was made with the residence hall staff. A staff can be effective only to the point that students perceive them as approachable. The freshman advisor seems to make it easier for the freshman to see the staff members in a helping manner. The use of other facilities on campus (e.g., the Infirmary, Counseling Center, Dean of Women's Office, academic advisors, Reading Clinic, and Speech and Hearing Clinic) were not significantly related to the ratings of the advisor. It takes time for a student to become acquainted with campus agencies and by that time replacement of this relationship with others has occurred. Since the freshman advisor program is essentially a residence hall activity, the value of these relationships has primary merit in the residential community.

For as much as college life is centered on academic pursuits, advisors who talked with their advisees about study habits, courses,

professors, scholarship, class attendance, budgeting time, and educationally enriching experiences had advisees who reported seeking help more from others. The advisor might not have had the specific course which was troubling the freshman, but since she was seen as being helpful in academic matters, this seemingly encouraged the new student to seek help from others including other college women, the residence hall staff, and her own professors.

All the above implications are derived from self-report ratings by the freshmen. The one objective criterion measure of the advisor-freshman relationship is the scaled difference score between the freshman's actual grade point average and her predicted grade point average. Although some students may suffer academic shock during the first term in college, there were significant relationships between: (1) the scaled difference score and the ratings of leadership attitudes of the advisor, and (2) the scaled difference score and the ratings of the advisor's academic help in adjustment to college. If the advisor was rated highly as one who conveyed behavior and feelings appropriate to a "good influence," generally showed respect for rules and the upholding of standards, expressed positive attitudes toward the campus community, had established her own goals and was generally moving toward them, and seemed prepared in her role as advisor, the freshman achieved higher grades in relation to her ability. The achievement to ability ratio was observed to be greatest for leadership attitudes exhibited by the freshman advisor but her perceived help academically also had a significant relationship.

Since correlation coefficients do not differentiate between cause and effect, it cannot be stated that the dimensions of leadership attitudes and academic help caused the freshman to achieve more in relation to her ability, but the positive perception of these dimensions of the relationship was related to achievement. Ratings of the relationship were obtained early in the first term of the freshman year, long before tests, papers, and final examinations were done. It seems reasonable to infer that a positive rating of the attitude of the advisor was positively related to the freshman's later academic performance. Further, it might be generalized that a freshman who rated her advisor highly might also perceive her whole environment more positively and, by the process of reinforcement through feedback, actually have a more successful experience. The importance of the data lie in the fact that the perception of support programs have potency in the lives of freshman women. Ways need to be found to encourage upperclass students with constructive leadership attitudes to establish meaningful relationships with new students.

SUMMARY

Freshman women in three residence halls at the University of Florida rated their volunteer advisors on helpfulness regarding college adjustment. The higher the freshman advisor was rated on the social dimension, the more satisfied was the freshman in the sense of belonging.

The higher the advisor was rated on the academic help category, the more the freshman sought help from others. The advisor who was rated high on personal help in adjusting to college was one who formed a continuing relationship with her freshman. The higher the freshman rated her advisor on leadership attitudes, the higher the freshman achieved academically.

The tone of college life can be greatly enhanced by effective freshman advisors with personal-academic orientations and constructive leadership attitudes. These women represent a different level of influence than do staff members and provide another channel of communication with beginning students. Most of all, though, the freshman advisor may be that one person who cares.

TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS OF THE RATINGS OF THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP WITH INDICES OF SATISFACTION

ADVISOR-HELPING RELATIONSHIP DIMENSIONS

	Standard Activities	Social Help	Academic Help	Personal Help	Leadership Attitudes	Mean of Rating
Satisfaction with Reception in Residence Hall	.380**	.268**	.280**	.242**	.337**	.345**
Orientation Week	.190**	.174**	.151*	.126*	.209**	.198**
Advisor Program	.301**	.405**	.358**	.356**	.388**	.423**
Time Advisor Spent	.425**	.562**	.527**	.506**	.472**	.577**
Current Relationship with Advisor	.324**	.467**	.483**	.500**	.434**	.513**
Number of Campus Activities Entered	.127*	.171**	.115	.161*	.158*	.167**
Number of Times Went Home Before Christmas Vacation	-.016	-.200**	-.063	-.153	-.091	-.127

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS OF THE RATINGS OF THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP WITH AMOUNT OF CONTACT AND DEGREE OF HELP FROM PERSONS IN THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

	Standard Activities	Social Help	Academic Help	Personal Help	Leadership Attitudes	Mean of Ratings
Number of Contacts with Residence Hall Staff:						
Professional Staff:	.118	.141*	.050	.136*	.034	.110
Student Staff:	.034	.090	.091	.137*	.015	.086
Degree of Help in Adjustment to College:						
Own Freshman Advisor	.387**	.542**	.522**	.548**	.454**	.575**
Other Freshman Advisors	.101	.113	.167**	.086	.081	.130*
Hall Council Representative	.056	.074	.183**	.010	.114	.096
Student Staff	.073	.076	.141*	.149*	.100	.127*
Professional Staff	.082	.054	.133*	.105	.108	.111
Own Professor	.068	.043	.171**	.034	.087	.093

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

TABLE 3

CORRELATIONS OF THE RATINGS OF THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SCALED DIFFERENCE SCORE BASED ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ACTUAL AND PREDICTED GRADE POINT AVERAGES

	Standard Activities	Social Help	Academic Help	Personal Help	Leadership Attitudes	Mean of Ratings
Scaled Difference Score	.076	.050	.151*	.112	.169**	.128*

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

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